

Strategic Reform

A Battle of Assumptions

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Everyone has a worldview that shapes how he or she interprets the environment and interacts with others, and every worldview is based on assumptions. Similarly, those individuals responsible for the unenviable task of creating, defining, and implementing national security strategy are forced to begin with assumptions. Worldviews underwritten by inaccurate or incomplete assumptions will struggle to produce predictable outcomes, regardless of the resources applied.¹ This article submits that the current national defense strategy includes three fundamental assumptions that should be questioned in order to provide a more reliable, affordable, and enduring security strategy for our nation.

The first assumption is that “uncertainty” has become the dominant characteristic of our security environment, requiring America to spend ever more money to sustain general readiness for unpredictable contingencies. The second is that our only reliable guide star is a need to pace China with high-end forces optimized for a force-on-force clash waged close to the Chinese coast for decisive control of the Pacific. The third is that all other potential applications of military power constitute “lesser included” cases requiring merely diminished application of high-end US strength. These assumptions drive the Department of Defense (DOD) to demand an overage of unaffordable forces while neglecting the innovations and long-term investments which could ensure that the twenty-first century will be an American century.

Some people see reduced defense spending as the end of America as a superpower, but this is not the beginning of the end. Rather, it is the passing of a phase. Defense strategy should set conditions that allow America to remain a (if not *the*) global superpower, but the DOD owes the nation a feasible strategy and an affordable military. Doing so requires reassessing inherited assumptions and strategic concepts as well as optimizing military forces to backstop political objectives with tailored hard-power options.

The military cannot build these strategies unilaterally. The DOD should either inform, and be informed by, the whole-of-government strategic community or risk building a quiver full of arrows that no politician wants to shoot—or worse, can shoot well. Reinvigorating a defense strategy community that can dive deeply into these challenges in all their complexity and emerge with profound designs to make America stronger and wealthier should lie at the heart of an overdue defense reform.

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Strategy in a Time of More Uncertainty—or Less?

Strategic military planning periodically cycles between “capability based” and “context based” paradigms.² In the first case, the nature of the next adversary is considered unknown, forcing the military to focus internally on development of advanced tech-versus-tech capabilities, often devoid of specific operational context.³ In the second case, the nature of future conflict is predicted, and planners can optimize for success by cultivating their own—and their allies’—strengths as opposed to the adversary’s vulnerabilities. If used correctly, both of these paradigms have strengths, and, once selected, both develop bureaucratic inertia that resists change. The trick is figuring out the right time to use one instead of the other. When change is required, the strengths of the alternative paradigm often offer solutions to the current crisis.

Three conditions generally determine the preferred paradigm. The first is the degree of uncertainty in the security environment. The second, the degree to which the military perceives an internal or external mandate to move away from an undesirable “way of war.”⁴ And the third, the desire to curate some aspect of present force structure—such as force size, technology investments, or particular missions—without self-evident justification.⁵ The more uncertain the world, the more the military wants to (or politicians want the military to) leave the past behind—or the more military leaders are driven to act as parochial caretakers rather than engineers of American superpower, the more capability-based planning dominates.

The United States as a superpower has undergone two prolonged periods of capability-based planning. First, Eisenhower’s “New Look” at the onset of the Cold War favored long-range nuclear deterrence over large forward forces. New Look allowed the demobilization of millions of American Soldiers after World War II and helped reset the American economy to a peacetime footing. By the end of the Cold War, concepts such as “Assault Breaker” and “Air-Land Battle” were extremely context driven with technology optimized to particular battlefields. The second capability-based period followed the collapse of the Soviet Union and continues today with generic culminating concepts like “Air Sea Battle” and hardware like the F-35.

In both cases, following World War II and the Cold War, the potential for military action was high, but the context of the next war remained unpredictable, due either to external uncertainty or shifting internal preferences. Defenders of the current capability-based paradigm point to Saddam Hussein’s surprise invasion of Kuwait, peacekeeping in the Balkans, the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, and the rise of China as evidence of uncertainty. They go on to postulate that the devolution of destructive technologies from near peers to client states to nonstate actors will lead to even greater potential for threats to gestate in unexpected corners of the globe. All are treated as proof of uncertainty and co-opted into a narrative justifying broad defense spending on better versions of current capabilities rather than as indications of trends that have changed the context for military action.

The United States did go through a major period of uncertainty as the world thawed from the Cold War. However, trends connecting recent events enhance certainty about competitor archetypes that the military may be called upon to engage, favoring a return to context-based planning. The first likely archetype that the DOD



should account for includes rogue states enabled by weapons of mass destruction (WMD) (e.g., Iran, Pakistan, and North Korea). The second includes “competitive superpowers” attempting to create regional hegemonies to challenge US primacy and undermine American rule sets that ensure our peaceful geopolitical and geo-economic power. This archetype is distinguished by competitive power projection and exemplified by Russia and China although the former may be collapsing back towards rogue status. The final archetype is the global insurgent who broadly rejects the Westphalian state system and threatens to wage revolutionary wars of culture and identity. There will be other enduring military missions—missile defense, nuclear deterrence, maintenance of a strategic reserve, rescue, noncombatant evacuation, humanitarian aid, and so forth—but these are only military activities within strategy. Strategy should contextualize specific adversaries and the means to achieve sufficient control over them.

Not every regional conflict demands American attention, but rogue states that reject international law and destabilize regions become a special case when they pursue WMDs. Such rogues threaten to terrorize allies or ignite arms races, both of which undermine American interests. While possession of WMDs is not a black-and-white trigger for action, the military should be prepared to deter hostilities, compel disarmament, or forcefully disarm a rogue of offensive WMDs through air strikes. The United States’ recent experience in Iraq demonstrates that total regime change of the state order maintained by a rogue may be less advantageous than strikes in support of limited objectives to modify the rogue’s behavior while leaving it largely intact. To maintain the strategic initiative, the US Air Force and Navy should be equipped to disarm an adversary quickly through limited-duration precision strikes with local penetration of defended territory.

As a planning factor, the scale of these operations is likely to require less capacity for high-end penetrating forces than the DOD is currently pursuing since they are likely to be used briefly and returned to a deterrence posture. Just as the United States will predictably use its asymmetric advantage in the vertical flank, so are rogue adversaries likely to exploit their asymmetric advantage in local human and physical terrain, unleashing reprisals via conventional, unconventional, and proxy forces (Russian “separatists” being only the most recent manifestation of that phenomenon). To counter this threat, the United States’ land forces—experts in territorial security and human terrain—should be ready to assist foreign partners most likely to feel the brunt of reprisal via an extended conventional defense capability. At this point, the Army, special operators, and the US intelligence enterprise—supported by low-end airpower—should be ready to assist regional allies through partnership and cooperation.

Of the two “competitor hegemonies,” China is by far the more important. Although the rise of an Asian peer competitor tempts many individuals to dust off Cold War power models, a fundamental distinction between the Soviet Empire and the People’s Republic of China (PRC) merits discussion. Following World War II, the globe was rebuilt into two distinct economic spheres of influence. The Western world, led by the United States, remained distinct from the Communist bloc. The economy of the one could rise or fail without significantly affecting the other.⁶

Strategy Regarding China

Globalization requires multiple powerful participants. The United States may currently establish the rule sets that enable the globalized market space, but the market itself requires the manufacturing engine and fiscal liquidity of China, the resource base of the Middle East and Latin America, and the technology development of America, Europe, Japan, Brazil, and India (to name but a few). The globalized market space would be diminished if a major player were knocked out, so purely competitive economic theories are insufficient to optimize creation of global wealth and security. The most promising economic strategy for the United States involves pursuing a blend of cooperation and competition to ensure that the international market grows but remains ultimately aligned to US-championed rule sets such as rule of law; protection of intellectual capital; preference for transactions denominated by the US dollar; transparent, multilateral treaty structures; access to the global commons; and respect for human rights.

Maintaining “co-opetition” between the United States and China assures that the economies of both countries remain intertwined.⁷ Doing so provides our two great nations mutual levers of influence well short of warfare on a new “ladder of escalation.” Considering the tremendous value added to the global market by China and the damaging void that would be left by China’s departure or diminishment, US policy should manage the rise of China to cement its position as the world’s “second greatest” superpower. America has repeatedly used soft power to condition China to work within the liberal institutions that underpin the current world order and can likely continue to do so. Even when China has risen to compete with America, as occurred with creation of the Asia Development Bank as a counter to the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, the effort reflects competition *within* a structure rather than rejection of one.⁸ America’s own rise as a superpower, beginning in the nineteenth century but exploding in the twentieth, was managed in part by Britain, which attempted to perpetuate a global system within which it could prosper. The trans-Atlantic “special relationship” and Allied success in two world wars are testament to Britain’s grand strategy of cultivating an advantageous, long-term international order over raw national preeminence.⁹

Economic co-opetition and superpower cultivation often require accommodation, but the United States should maintain hard-power levers that can hobble China if it seeks exclusive regional control or pursues unacceptable policies. To that end, the defense strategic community should contextualize why, where, and how the United States can assert control over China through military action. Although an invasion of Taiwan by the PRC to force reunification is the oft-cited *casus belli* for US intervention (one of the inherited assumptions up for reexamination), the far more important concern is managing China’s broader rise as a global power. China’s rise forces it to accept an unprecedented reliance on external resources and markets, and President Hu Jintao’s “new historic missions” established a new role for the Chinese military in ensuring those markets.¹⁰ That new role exposes new vulnerabilities.

Countering force projection and holding a nation’s vulnerable lines of communication at risk (sea-lanes, supply chains, and pipelines), again, happen to be a specialty of the US Air Force and Navy. Since the abject “defeat” of China may be

undesirable, given our economic interdependence, and unnecessary, given China's frequent accommodation of US pressure, guaranteeing our ability to exploit specific vulnerabilities and respond to limited escalations may be a far more effective military contribution to US grand strategy. Such limited actions allow the United States to modulate its "red lines" and ensure that China continually adapts to America rather than telegraphs monolithic strategic designs that an adversary must merely optimize against. (Paradoxically, we present China with a context-based threat par excellence, and its investment in the "Joint Anti-Air Raid Campaign" is a logical optimization to counter our capabilities.)¹¹

The most obvious vulnerability of China's power-projection capability is the country's reliance on imported oil to produce the diesel and jet fuel that runs both its commercial and military ships and aircraft. China's geography has made it virtually an island with poor road and rail connectivity to the south, west, and north, and a concentrated population along the coastal east. Its geography dictates that most of the oil which eventually becomes diesel and jet fuel arrives by transoceanic vessel.¹² Close to home, China has built an impressive air defense system to mitigate the United States' ability to intervene in the Taiwan Strait, but China lacks the "away game" to defend vital resources such as energy in transit.

This does not imply that the US Air Force or Navy will sink Chinese oil tankers in the Indian Ocean (and cause environmental disasters) whenever tension escalates past diplomacy. Military options well short of sinking a vessel (e.g., influencing port access, waylaying Chinese vessels, and selectively closing straits) apply scalable pressure to China's vulnerabilities.¹³ Those military options would be best suited as the coercive tools of an overall competitive economic strategy that mitigates the risk of market disruptions to the United States and its allies while maximizing the impact of disruptions on China.

The Chinese could respond by attempting to convoy their energy and/or commodity shipments with the protection of navy vessels of the People's Liberation Army, but the United States can continue to hold maritime assets at risk—particularly in the Indian Ocean, where America has near-total submarine dominance (for now). Old techniques can take on new relevance in this kind of fight with stealth aircraft mining harbors with standoff weapons and a return to the use of Marines (and now SEALs) as boarding parties to seize Chinese-flagged cargo ships as a prize for political leverage. It will also demand the cultivation of US access to, and partnerships with, nations around the Indian Ocean that own the ports on which China relies.

China's globalized role means shared risk and pain for pursuing an offshore control or distant-influence strategy. In 1905, near the height of the Royal Navy's power, First Lord of the British Admiralty John "Jackie" Fisher said, "Five keys lock up the world"; Singapore and the Strait of Malacca led the list of vital nodes.¹⁴ China's strategy of making itself an indispensable node of the global market means it has turned the "Malacca dilemma" into shared risk for the entire globalized market, but China stands to lose far more than the United States in a contest of access. The potential for long-term, sustainable control offered by a strategy that lets the United States use the depth of multiple domains and vast geography is appealing in itself. Such a strategy showcases the extent of US reach rather than exposing the limits of our power.

Affecting China's power projection and access to energy offers an affordable and reversible set of escalation options that the US military can do (and afford) now through doctrinal modifications and redirected near-term investment. A strategy should provide a vision of victory, and victory in a military contest against China *does not* look like either a Normandy landing or “shock and awe” over Baghdad. The United States is not likely to put boots on Chinese shores or attempt a decapitation strike against the Communist Party of China—an act that could unleash Chinese weapons of last resort. Furthermore, many of China's external vulnerabilities are best exposed beyond the South China Sea, meaning that the Chinese will lack the excuse of defending their dubious sovereignty over territories they assert to be historically Chinese. Success in such a pressure campaign—or even in the unlikely event of a war—looks like the Allied maritime interdiction campaign against Japan in 1943–45, strangling the flow of necessities and leading to an inevitable, albeit slow, victory.

The DOD should exchange aspirations of a costly and risky short war to embrace a successful, long-competition strategy. We should also consider expanding our portfolio of Pacific allies beyond the dwindling number able to afford the capabilities we deem decisive for a hypothetical Pacific battle. To do so would expand US potential to enlist partners who either cannot afford the financial strain of high-end forces or whose position within China's sphere of influence prevents them from bearing the diplomatic strain of an unambiguous alignment to the United States. The security-force-assistance and partnership-building specialists of the US Army, Special Operations Command, and Air Force are uniquely optimized to provide rugged, inexpensive, tailored activities that build on touch points of shared interests around the Pacific. Many of these engagement activities thrive on shoestring resources now but could be upscaled to increase our agile strategic access and complicate China's ability to take unilateral action.

Slow, long term, persistent—successful US strategy in the Pacific will likely need words like these, but the services are currently doubling down in pursuit of resource-intensive, high-end-capability portfolios. This is potentially the most difficult part of proposing strategic reform: overcoming bureaucratic inertia and political headwind to create new strategic platforms and to invest in projects that will mature over decades rather than by the next election cycle. China is likely to exploit our perceived short-attention spans, unpredictable politics, and pay-for-play influence within think tanks to undermine such a long-term effort. The DOD should not only harmonize service strategists but also integrate a long-horizon strategic effort within the broader policy community. National strategies with such staying power are typically signature doctrines like the Monroe Doctrine, Truman Doctrine, or Carter Doctrine. It remains to be seen whether the United States or DOD can establish such an enduring doctrine with regard to China, but failure to make the attempt invites emergent pathologies to become dominant in their own right.



Strategy Regarding “Lesser Included” Cases

Finally, irregular adversaries and global insurgents, whether unleashed as proxies of a rogue state or coalescing in pursuit of their own agendas, are likely to continue demanding low-intensity containment and engagement. These threats are so consistently likely across any strategic forecast that failure to develop low-cost/low-intensity engagement capability will probably waste vast resources through constant overmatch. Takfiri terrorists, pirates, third-generation gangs, and cartels have all proven capable of threatening US interests, and the fiscal strain they impose has become our Achilles’ heel. Planning to use high-end forces against such threats gives them more clout than they merit by amplifying their impact on our own resources.

Containment of irregular adversaries is a long-term affair, often continuing until they either collapse under the frustration of disallowed objectives or fracture when a subtle instrument of containment denies local political factions a unifying foe. Successful containment can thus be measured by ever-less expenditure of resources yielding a satisfactory measure of control. Fortunately, commonality exists between the types of forces required for containing a rogue’s irregular proxies, establishing partnerships for security force assistance, and containing global insurgents; consequently, these low-end forces are multimission, enhancing their efficiency. The absence of any serious efforts by the Air Force and Navy to present forces optimized to the lower-end spectrum of conflict means that low-end adversaries will be able to exploit this national vulnerability for the foreseeable future.

Conclusion: Reinvigorating Defense Strategy

The DOD would serve the nation well by reassessing the assumptions that guide national strategy. If the department’s assumptions are not right, then strategists risk frittering resources pursuing capabilities we cannot afford rather than reforming the DOD for success in a context we can create. The nation needs a respite from massive defense spending but cannot give up an activist, full-spectrum foreign policy or risk allowing competitors to destabilize the world into fragmented power blocs that communicate through violence. We are overdue for a reorientation from inward to outward and from capabilities to context, to design-control strategies appropriate for actual adversaries. The first step is to reject underperforming, compressed, or exceptionalist assumptions about the security environment and invest in establishing a DOD strategic community that can address challenges—complex as they may be—as they actually confront us.

If they are currently unable to identify—or politically constrained from identifying—these adversaries by name, then DOD planners should at least prepare for them as likely archetypes. This essay (remember, that word means “attempt”) proposes that the DOD optimize to at least three predictable adversary archetypes. Proper understanding of each particular adversary is the key to attaining the most control from the fewest resources. Monolithic and generic strategic concepts will not do, and the DOD should resist the temptation to retreat to the false defilade that simplicity is certainty and nuance is uncertainty. The capability-based paradigm has gone far

enough, leaving the services hostage champions for pinnacle capabilities, at premium prices, to deal with catastrophic chimeras. America requires more than the defeatist refrain, “Undo sequester or face losing battles against uncertain threats.” The DOD should reform—and the reform begins with strategy. ✪

Notes

1. “Unfortunately, intellectual rigor can only guarantee that reasoning is internally consistent: its conclusions follow from its premises. It cannot guarantee that those premises were right in the first place, and with bad premises, even the most rigorous reasoning will produce nonsense. Premises don’t even have to be wrong to generate false conclusions. They only have to be incomplete, and no set of premises can prove its own completeness.” Ian Fletcher, *Free Trade Doesn’t Work: What Should Replace It and Why* (Washington, DC: US Business and Industry Council, 2011), 11.

2. The author’s use of the term *context based* expands upon the rubric of *threat-based* planning. An excellent review of the cyclical transition between capability-based planning and threat-based planning can be found in John F. Troxell, “Force Planning and U.S. Defense Policy,” chap. 12 in Joseph R. Cerami and James F. Holcomb Jr., eds., *US Army War College Guide to Strategy* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: US Army War College, February 2001), <http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/army-usawc/strategy/>.

3. The F-35, optimized in the 1990s to fight former Soviet Union air defenses associated with the bygone “central front” in Europe, is poorly suited to the Pacific. The F-35 lacks the range to cover Pacific Command’s area of responsibility and requires creation of expensive NATO-style “main operating bases” to satiate its intense logistical demands. These facts have been the subject of multiple reports, but a particularly relevant assessment is found in David Axe, “Test Pilot Tried to Warn Navy about Troubled Stealth Jet,” *War Is Boring*, 26 August 2013, <https://medium.com/war-is-boring/8d09a6b858ae>.

4. See John T. Correll’s account of the Air Force’s advocacy of “The New American Way of War,” *Air Force Magazine* 79, no. 4 (April 1996): 20–23, <http://www.airforcemag.com/MagazineArchive/Pages/1996/April%201996/0496airpower.aspx>; and a critique of such “new way of war” concepts expertly compiled by LTC Antulio J. Echevarria in “An American Way of War or Way of Battle?,” Strategic Studies Institute, January 2004, <http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pdffiles/pub662.pdf>.

5. “The theory of ‘anti-access/area denial’ . . . is gobbledygook that we sell to Congress because if we just told them, ‘We can kick anybody’s asses,’ they wouldn’t buy us all the stuff we want.” From Thomas P. M. Barnett, well-known Pentagon planner and author of *The Pentagon’s New Map: War and Peace in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 2004). See Barnett, “Let’s Rethink America’s Military Strategy,” video, 23:43, TED, February 2005, http://www.ted.com/talks/thomas_barnett_draws_a_new_map_for_peace.html.

6. “There is one clear similarity and one important difference between Chinese-US relations today and USSR-US relations in the second half of the past century. The similarity is that there is a likely enduring gulf in core principles and worldviews between China and the United States—certainly making possible another intense and lasting geopolitical rivalry. The difference, however, is that China is deeply integrated into the global economy and joined at the economic hip with the United States, whereas the USSR was not part of the global capitalist economy and its economic ties with the United States were close to nonexistent.” Prof. Geoffrey Garrett, “China-US Economic Relations after the Global Financial Crisis,” in *Rising China, Global Challenges and Opportunities*, ed. Ligang Song and Jane Golley (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 2011), 149.

7. Barry J. Nalebuff and Adam M. Brandenburger, “Co-opetition: Competitive and Cooperative Business Strategies for the Digital Economy,” *Strategy & Leadership* 25, no. 6 (1997): 28–35.

8. Shannon Van Sant, “China Launches New Asia Development Bank,” *Voice of America*, 24 October 2014, <http://www.voanews.com/content/china-launches-new-asian-development-bank/2494903.html>.

9. “Through the 19th century and up until World War II, *Europe* led the effort to spread liberal democracy and capitalism—and to guide Western nations to a position of global dominance. Not until the postwar era did the United States take over stewardship of the West. Pax Britannica set the stage for

Pax Americana, and Washington inherited from its European allies a liberal international order that rested on solid commercial and strategic foundations" (italics in original). Charles A. Kupchan, "The Decline of the West: Why America Must Prepare for the End of Dominance," *Atlantic*, 20 March 2012, <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/03/the-decline-of-the-west-why-america-must-prepare-for-the-end-of-dominance/254779/>.

10. The "new historic missions," otherwise known as the "three provides and one role" are defined as follows: "(1) providing an important guarantee of strength for the party to consolidate its ruling position, (2) providing a strong security guarantee for safeguarding the period of important strategic opportunity for national development, (3) providing a powerful strategic support for safeguarding national interests, and (4) playing an important role in safeguarding world peace and promoting common development." Provide no. 2 elevates the military's role from that of a domestic guarantor of security and Communist Party rule to that of a force projector who can ensure access to the global market. James Mulvenon, "Chairman Hu and the PLA's 'New Historic Missions,'" *China Leadership Monitor* 27 (Winter 2009): 2, <http://media.hoover.org/sites/default/files/documents/CLM27JM.pdf>.

11. Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Military Power of the People's Republic of China, 2009: Annual Report to Congress* (Washington, DC: Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2009), 17, http://www.defense.gov/pubs/pdfs/China_Military_Power_Report_2009.pdf.

12. Fifty-one percent of China's petroleum imports come from the Middle East, and 16 percent come from Africa via the Indian Ocean. China remains a net importer of crude oil, and 80 percent of its imports come through the Malacca Strait. China is actively expanding its pipeline capacity, but these pipelines are themselves highly exposed targets. US Energy Information Administration, *China* (Washington, DC: US Energy Information Administration, 4 February 2014), 10–11 (oil imports), 12–13 and 23–24 (oil pipelines), <http://www.eia.gov/countries/analysisbriefs/China/china.pdf>.

13. Col T. X. Hammes, USMC, Retired, "Offshore Control Is the Answer," *Proceedings Magazine* 138/12/1,318 (December 2012), <http://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2012-12/offshore-control-answer>.

14. P. K. Kemp, ed., *The Papers of Admiral Sir John Fisher*, vol. 1 (London: Navy Records Society, 1960), 161.



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